Illinois Wesleyan University

From the SelectedWorks of Meg Miner

October 2010

Women's Health Guides

Contact Author

Start Your Own SelectedWorks

Notify Me of New Work

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/meg_miner/9

Women's Health Guides

Jo Ann Rosenfeld, ed., ***HANDBOOK OF WOMEN'S HEALTH*, *2nd ed.*** New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 352p. bibl. illus. index. tables. pap., $60.00, ISBN 978-0521695251.

Rose S. Fife & Sarina B. Schrager, ***ACP HANDBOOK OF WOMEN'S HEALTH***. Philadelphia: American College of Physicians Press, 2009. 619p. bibl. illus. index. tables. pap., $64.95, ISBN 978-1934465103.

Jane L. Delgado, ***THE LATINA GUIDE TO HEALTH: CONSEJOS AND CARING ANSWERS***. New York: Newmarket Press, 2010. 208p. index. pap., $15.95, ISBN 978-1557048547 (English); ISBN 978-1557048554 (Spanish: *Guía de Salud: Consejos y Respuestas para la Mujer Latina*).

Miriam E. Nelson & Jennifer Ackerman, ***THE STRONG WOMEN'S GUIDE TO TOTAL HEALTH***. New York: Rodale Books, 2010. 432p. ill. index. $27.99, ISBN 978-1594867798.

Reviewed by Meg Miner

The fight for equal rights for women may be over a hundred years old, but in medical research, women have only been treated equally since the 1990s. That is also the time that evidence-based women's health handbooks started to appear. Up to that point, most studies only included recommendations for women that had been deduced from analyses of men's responses to clinical trials.

Four new publications on women's health synthesize recent findings to varying degrees. Rather than generalizing studies of men to women, they ground their understanding of influ-

ences on women's health in research that does not end with biological differences, but instead begins by acknowledging the social and behavioral differences between the two sexes as well. Two of these publications are designed specifically for healthcare professionals while two are primarily for consumers, but healthcare providers could also benefit from the consumer guides, and institutions training professionals for the field will want to consider the attributes of each.

Guides for Practitioners

In the introduction to the second edition of the *Handbook of Women's Health*, editor Jo Ann Rosenfeld outlines ways women have been marginalized in medical research, also asserting that factors other than gender are relevant to women's health outcomes. Each chapter makes clear the connection of its topic to women's roles in society, but Rosenfeld also warns against making across-the-board assumptions about women: "Women's immunology, drug use and metabolism may differ and may affect the treatment of diseases," she says, "However, there are more differences among women, making easy conclusions difficult" (p. 6).

The cover of the 2009 edition (the first was published in 2001) claims that this update "incorporates the latest evidence and research findings on a wide range of problems." Most chapters have a lengthy reference list; however, many of the citations predate even the first edition, and more are from the 1990s than might be expected. For example, Chapter 24 on coronary heart disease contains 107 references, but only 27 of the cited sources were published after 2001 (pp. 276-281).

Healthcare professionals in the United States are the audience for this volume. The cover description states that more contributors have been added since the first edition; in fact, half of the contributors are new, although there are two fewer contributors overall. Thirteen of the twenty-nine chapters are by Rosenfeld herself, and she co-wrote three others. All contributors are in the United States and are medical doctors or have doctorates in other disciplines.

A disclaimer on the copyright page says that the publisher is not responsible "for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites." This reasonable limitation is asserted in all four of the resources reviewed here, but only this one goes on to say it "can make no warranties that the information contained herein is totally free from error, not least because clinical standards are constantly changing through research and regulation." Perfection is not expected, but a higher level of confidence in the finished work might be!

Clearly this book was not meant to be read from cover to cover. Inconsistent chapter structures make it difficult to get a sense of the whole work. Some chapters supply only subheadings with brief, bulleted summaries of relevant recommendations. Of these chapters, some have introductions and some do not. Others are structured more as essays or stand-alone articles, complete with conventional introductions, transitions, and even historical analysis. Some chapters include case studies, but again, not consistently (pages 43, 137, and 221, for examples, give only paragraph-long scenarios). Some reference sections include recommended additional readings, but most supply only direct source citations. Chapter 3 (on nutrition) illustrates a final inconsistency: here, the author actually judges whether the evidence for a particular assertion is good or bad or of a certain level (A, B, etc., p. 31), whereas other chapters simply summarize research and recommend other sources.

The *Handbook of Women's Health* is well indexed and has generous graphs, charts, and in-text boxes to emphasize points. There are also screening questions practitioners can use for patient self-reporting. The book's size makes it handy for either desktop or bedside use, and the glued binding is secure yet relaxed enough to lie open on its own. Overall, the topic is comprehensively covered, but librarians serving health professionals will want to weigh the drawbacks of this text's organization and dated citations in comparison with the next title.

The *ACP [American College of Physicians] Handbook of Women's Health* is compiled more uniformly. Editors Rose Fife and Sarina Schrager and the book's other contributors are practitioners, medical doctors, and educators. Their stated aim is "to enable the physician (or trainee) to find a quick summation of the key features, differential diagnoses, and overall approach to the social and behavioral contexts of women's health in today's world" (p. xx). The ACP offers only one disclaimer on the copyright page (regarding the current accuracy of information on drug dosages).

This book has two parts: one is arranged by disorders of organ systems, and the other by stages of women's lives. It is unclear why chapters called "Women's Role in Society" and "Substance Use and Abuse" are included in the section on disorders. Aside from that, the text has an internal consistency that makes it easy to jump into different chapters and still have an overall frame of reference.

Within each chapter, each section begins with boxed "Key Points" about the topic with a different-colored background that makes it easy to focus on at a glance. Chapter subheadings differ depending on content but are present in all chapters and consistent in appearance. In contrast to the Rosenfeld text, each section in this handbook

ends with a short list of references, most of which are for publications from within the last decade (one exception includes twenty-three sources but only has three that were published later than 2000; pp. 272-273).

There are black and white pictures throughout the main text and color plates inserted at the end. Tables, diagrams, flow charts, and an extensive index augment the text. Finally, the book is sized for portability — thick, but probably narrow enough to fit in a lab coat pocket. The paperback copy will lie open on its own at the center of the text, but will need to be held or propped open to read pages at the beginning or the end.

Summary of Practitioners' Guides

Both texts address the way diseases may appear different in women than in men, and both encourage practitioners to consider the sociological and psychological factors that may be influencing their patients' health. It is possible the Rosenfeld volume takes a longer, more historical perspective while Fife and Schrager's is more concerned with the direct relevance of recent literature, and that this explains the difference between the volumes in how recent the references are. Although the editors of both books indicate that they are interested in current research, the introduction to the *ACP Handbook* adds that "[r]eferences have been provided to help the practitioner who may want to explore a subject in greater depth" (p. xx). Perhaps a selection process for which references to include was used but not described. Nevertheless, collection developers trying to provide compilations from recent literature in the field will find them in both. Additionally, both of these volumes acknowledge the disparity in research aimed at understanding health care for different ethnicities, and it will be worth watching for practitioner-level publications specifically related to different population groups.

Guides for Consumers

The only volume here that addresses a particular ethnic group is *The Latina Guide to Health*, by Jane Delgado, clinical psychologist and long-time health advocate in the Hispanic community. In two earlier editions (1997 and 2002) of another title, Delgado approached this topic from a mind-body-spirit perspective. That approach is present in this volume as well, with input from other Latinas added to illustrate applications for recent research findings.

As can be expected in a popular work, there are no bibliographic references in this text, but throughout the volume Delgado's narrative ties her assertions to the people she consulted while writing it. It is possible to follow the authority of these sources even without explicit citation.

Part I of this volume, "Health in the Life of Today's Latinas," covers topics according to Latinas' roles in family and community. Short quotes and stories from members of the Hispanic community illustrate particular points. Delgado states that stories are the culturally appropriate way to address this population, as well as the best way to encourage effective changes in health attitudes (p. 14). One example of a culturally relevant concern is the feeling of predestination that is associated with being genetically disposed to certain diseases such as diabetes. Some people believe there is nothing they can do to avoid this so-called epidemic in the Latino community (p. 41). Delgado dispels this myth, citing research that behavioral and environmental factors contribute to the disease, and discusses potential developments to watch for in the news.

"Positive self-esteem is very important to health," emphasizes Delgado, and she quotes from a 2004 report that Latinas have positive self-images that will be offended by terms like "obesity" (p. 51). Negative messages are more likely to make Latinas and others give up trying to be healthy. Tailoring what makes sense to one's individual needs is the approach Delgado advises (pp. 54-57).

In Part II, specific behavioral and disease-related health topics are addressed. Each description includes shaded sidebars with "health points" and "myths vs. facts," and each topic ends with a section on where to learn more, with names and URLs for government agencies, professional associations, organizations, and foundations. This part ends with a useful glossary of frequently used words.

Part III offers a number of resources, including lists of decision-making questions patients can consider, resources to consult, and forms and charts for compiling personal histories. The volume ends with an index to the entire work.

While this book is addressed to Latinas, some words and phrases are given in both English and Spanish, so non-Spanish speakers working with this population will find it instructive for vocabulary as well as for cultural insights. The simultaneously published Spanish-language edition will be of interest to libraries serving Spanish-speaking communities.

The Strong Women's Guide to Total Health is the ninth book in the popular "strong"- themed guides on various health topics by Miriam Nelson. Nelson and co-author Jennifer Ackerman teach at Tufts University and have been involved in national and local research and health policy initiatives for more

than two decades. Their goal in this book is to guide women through the maze of conflicting messages about health and diet "to take charge of your own health and minimize your risk of disease by making knowledgeable personal health choices" (p. xi). The first step to understanding one's health needs is assessing one's current status. The twenty-page assessment section, containing eight "atypical measures of overall health" (p. xix) seems a daunting place to start, since some of the measures will require a clinic visit. However, the information here may guide readers to the parts of the book that can address their needs.

Each of the eight parts begins with a brief introduction of a bodily system or health topic and the changing ways we view it, including culturally and through the lens of media. Within each part are chapters describing specific body functions or organs. Each chapter opens with an overview of the role of that function or organ, followed by advice for preventing or treating associated diseases, injuries, or deficiencies.

Cultural myths and recent research outcomes are addressed throughout. For examples, Nelson and Ackerman explain that "the pharmaceutical industry has exaggerated the problem of osteopenia (low bone density)," and describe bone density measurements and the way they fit with an overall consideration of behavioral and genetic factors that can be calculated to determine risk. The authors recommend addressing concerns individually with a health care provider rather than settling for the drug-makers' perspective (p. 174).

The last part of the book, "Flipping the Switch," synthesizes advice into a total health and wellness regimen (including charts) and describes other wellness topics such as stress management and food intake. There are illustrated exercise routines and charts for determining recommended ages for screening tests. The book ends with a resource section (books, organizations, and websites), organized by chapter, and a substantial index.

The language is accessible, and there are clear explanations of topics women may not want to ask a health professional, as well as concepts they may not have considered before. One striking analogy is the suggestion that we think of our skin as the "alchemist" for our body (p. 79); this term transforms the seemingly passive role of this organ to one of an active ally in keeping healthy. There are tables, question lists and boxed text giving points of information and advice. Illustrations and recommendations are comprehensive and easy to follow, and the guide can be read cover-to-cover or dipped into as needed. Each chapter has a consistent structure that relates it to the content of the others but also allows it to stand on its own.

Summary of Consumers' Guides

Both of these works could be used for instruction on women's health. Nelson and Ackerman's detailed overviews of anatomical functions and societal definitions make *The Strong Women's Guide* particularly useful where focused readings on biological topics are needed. In both guides, the absence of jargon and the treatment of common misperceptions would be helpful in discussing current health issues in the classroom and in the home. Collections serving only the general public should have both. Perhaps not every academic library needs the consumer texts, but every academic librarian concerned about women's health should read them!

For 20 years women have had the benefit of health advice based on research about them. Each of these four volumes is designed to help practitioners and the public make evidence-based decisions about women's health, and each achieves its goals. A search for similar guides published during this time period revealed only one other.[1] That guide was written by women doctors and published in separate German, British, and American editions, and so likely includes culturally relevant information. Certainly the opportunities for research on women's health will continue to increase; women can only gain as a result.

Note

1. Sarah Jarvis, ed.-in-chief, *Women's Health for Life: Medical Advice You Can Trust; Symptoms, Treatment, Prevention*. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2009.

[*Meg Miner is an assistant professor, as well as the university archivist and special collections librarian, at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois, where she also works with health programs and the School of Nursing.*]